

Chuck Mattke – Hooves of Heaven - 1

This is Kansas Profile. I'm Ron Wilson, director of the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development at Kansas State University.

Can you hear the sound of thundering hooves? It's the sound of a horse galloping. Those hooves and the horses who have them might be just the thing which some children need. Today we'll meet a man in rural Kansas who has seen first-hand the beneficial effect of horses on troubled youth. It's today's Kansas Profile.

Chuck Mattke is the founder of Hooves of Heaven, an equine assisted learning organization in northwest Kansas. Chuck has a heart for troubled youth, having had some challenges as a young person himself. "I have dyslexia and had trouble in school, got into fights," Chuck said. His father traveled all over the world in the military before retiring to the family farm near WaKeeney. WaKeeney is a rural community of 1,850 people. Now, that's rural.

In big city schools, Chuck had seen – and experienced - how some youth were treated as dumb and given no respect. He always had a knack for relating to troubled kids. Chuck studied criminal justice in college and became a truck driver. He and his wife raised their two children. "Once our kids were grown, we decided to get into foster care," Chuck said.

While Chuck's daughter was still in high school, she started giving riding lessons as her supervised agricultural experience in FFA. "I noticed that she might have 25 kids for riding lessons, and some were driving fifty miles to get here," Chuck said. He noted this strong interest in the horses as well as beneficial effects on the children.

Chuck did some studying and learned about a program called EAGALA. EAGALA is an international nonprofit association for professionals using equine therapy to address mental health and human development needs. He and his daughter became certified in EAGALA.

Chuck has seen these benefits first-hand. "One time I lied about my age to get a job at a camp, but on the day I was to report to work, I got a call saying there was no job," Chuck said. "Then they told me I could be a horse wrangler instead. Every time I've had trouble, it seems horses would show up," he said. "This is my time to give back."

In 2005, Chuck established Hooves of Heaven, a foundation created with the vision of bringing people and horses together. Hooves of Heaven offers riding lessons and human-horse interaction for troubled youth. "One of the gifts God gave these horses is to mirror the handler," Chuck said. "These horses have a knack for reading these kids." Giving a kid time to work with a horse and express his or her own voice appears to help. The kids might be foster children, juvenile justice clients, or local families. Chuck has worked with kids on suicide watch and gang members from Kansas City with amazing results.

Following the EAGALA principles, youth might be introduced to horses and assigned tasks with a given horse while other horses remain in the same pen. "It helps them deal with having other issues intervene when you're trying to get something done," Chuck said.

Often the youth get their first ride on a well-trained horse so it is a really positive experience. Then untrained colts are brought in and the youth experience the challenges of trying to train them. The lessons of the training can benefit the youth themselves.

“You don’t tell the kids what to do,” Chuck said. “You have them tell you what’s going on, and then you use what they’re telling you to help them.”

As the kids give voice to what is happening in the human-horse interaction, it seems to help them understand how human relationships can be improved as well. For more information, go to hoovesofheaven.com.

Can you hear the sound of thundering hooves? It’s the sound of a horse galloping. Those hooves might be carrying a rider, but they may also carry solutions for troubled youth. We salute Chuck Mattke and all those involved with Hooves of Heaven for making a difference with equine-assisted learning.

And there’s more. We’ll learn about life-changing examples from this program next week.

For the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development, this is Ron Wilson with Kansas Profile.